

## RETURN TO COOPER'S CREEK

### In the Tracks of Burke and Wills and Their Predecessors

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The conquest of unknown Australia by the early explorers is brought to life in their logs and journals, extracts from which are widely and frequently quoted in writings on the history of Australian exploration. The explorers' own journals and narratives provide the basic material from which history is written.

The work of exploration in an unknown land inevitably involves elements of difficulty and danger. As C. T. Madigan wrote: "They travelled when everything before them was unknown and no man could tell what the morrow would bring forth."

The immensity of the Australian continent and the more or less arid nature of the greater part of its interior presented fundamental problems. Anxieties engendered by the uncertainty of water supply provided a major preoccupation of the explorers, whose progress towards their objective was often governed by the availability of essential water.

Ernest Giles wrote: "To the traveller in such a wilderness, when he once turns his back upon a water, the ever-recurring question presents itself—when and where shall I obtain more! The explorer is necessarily insatiable for water, no quantity can satisfy him, for he requires it always and in every place." The explorers of inland Australia moving in the direction of their objective and trying to keep on course often found themselves in a dry and hungry environment. The success or failure of the expedition might depend on finding sufficient water ahead. Thus the discovery of a watercourse containing ample and permanent waters in the arid regions of the interior of the continent would be a notable event and a valuable find indeed. Cooper's Creek is such a watercourse.

#### GEOGRAPHY OF COOPER'S CREEK

Cooper's Creek traverses a large area of the great silent Inland. It is a most important river system, and is responsible for the creation of much of that distinctive typographical feature of South-West Queensland—the Channel Country. It

heads up in Central Queensland on the western slopes of the Great Divide. The Thompson and Barcoo Rivers come together just north of Windorah to form Cooper's Creek. This gives rise to the geographical oddity of two rivers joining forces to form a creek.

However, this very fact gives an indication of the character of the Cooper, which, like other inland river systems, tends to lose itself out in flat, arid country on the way to its destination in Lake Eyre after a strong beginning in areas of higher rainfall.

In the border regions through Nappa Merrie pastoral holding in Queensland and Innamincka cattle station on the South Australian side, the course of the Cooper contains wide and beautiful stretches of water which in dry seasons become isolated waterholes, but never dry up. This life-line of plentiful waters and shady trees in an otherwise inhospitable and forbidding land of red sandhills and bare Gibber plains explains why the homesteads of these two immense holdings are situated so relatively close together, being less than 30 miles apart along the creek.

Cooper's Creek has figured prominently in the history of the explorers who were first to penetrate the difficult central regions of this continent. Much of this remote "outback" is still largely as the pioneers found it, and travelling through it gives one the feeling of, in a sense, sharing in their adventures, and details from the logs of their journeys are even now, after the lapse of more than a century, constantly brought before the traveller.

The subject matter of this paper will be presented under the following main headings:

- The discovery and naming of Cooper's Creek by Charles Sturt.
- The exploration of Cooper's Creek and its headwaters by Mitchell, Kennedy and A. C. Gregory.
- The drama and tragedy of Burke and Wills.
- Old abandoned Innamincka township and the A.I.M.
- Conrick's Nappa Merrie Station and the "DIG" tree.
- The Society's Reserve at Burke's Depot Camp LXV on the Cooper.

### STURT DISCOVERS COOPER'S CREEK

The honour of discovering Cooper's Creek belongs to Charles Sturt (1795-1869). The geographical significance of this important inland waterway makes its discovery one of the highlights of Sturt's attempt to reach the centre of the continent. It compensates to some extent for the failure of this expedition (1844-46) to reach its objective.

Sturt has been described by Alan Moorehead as "something of a giant in Australian exploration" and as "the most literate of travellers, the most persistent and the most adventurous." Sturt certainly compiled a detailed narrative of the trials and tribulations of his explorations and attempted to give to the world a description of the nature of the country, the vegetation and the birdlife of the regions he traversed.

Sturt's own narrative of this expedition in book form (two volumes) is reproduced by the Libraries Board of South Australia (1965) as *Australiana Facsimile Editions No. 5* from a copy of the original publications held in the Public Library of South Australia.

With the help of latitudes and longitudes (the accuracy of which latter is not to be relied upon) noted every now and again in his Journal, as well as odd compass bearings, it is possible to trace Sturt's movements on his several probes into inland Australia with the aid of the Australian Geographical Series 1:1,000,000 maps produced by the Department of National Development, Division of National Mapping (Canberra A.C.T.).

Sturt first encountered the channels of the watercourse he subsequently named Cooper's Creek during his determined attempt to reach the centre of the continent from Depot Fort Grey between 14 August 1845, his date of departure from the Depot, and 8 September, the date on which he turned back after reaching the confines of the great sandy desert, later named Simpson Desert.

#### FINDS AND NAMES STRZELECKI'S CREEK

Fort Grey was situated in the extreme north-west corner of what is now the State of New South Wales. Sturt gave the location of the Depot as in latitude 29 deg. 6 min. 30 sec. and in longitude 141 deg. 5 min. 8 sec. They left the Depot at 9 a.m. on the morning of 14 Aug. 1845 and rode 26 miles in a N.N.W. direction before halting. On 15 August they breakfasted at a small pool of water after covering six miles and finally "halted after a long journey in a valley in which there was a kind of watercourse with plenty of water, our latitude being 28 deg. 21 min. 39 sec." On 17 Aug. they passed over high ridges of sand thickly covered with spinifex and later crossed some flats of much greater extent than usual, halting at a creek containing a long pond of water between 2ft. and 3ft. deep.

It was on the 18 August, according to Sturt's narrative, that after crossing three very high sandridges they descended into a plain of about three miles in breadth and observed a line of box trees stretching right across their course at the further extremity of this plain. On arriving at the trees they

found that "they were growing in the broad bed of a creek and were overhanging a beautiful sheet of water such as we had not seen for many a day."

Sturt says, "It was altogether too important a feature to pass without further examination . . . this fine sheet of water was more than 60 yards broad by about 120 long. . . . Our latitude at this point was 28 deg. 3 min. S at a distance of 86 miles from the Park" (Depot). He named this watercourse Strzelecki's Creek.

Sturt and his party made first contact with channels of Cooper's Creek on the fifth day out from their Depot (Fort Grey), but he was yet to realise the extent and nature of this important river system.

Sturt writes: "I debated within myself whether or not to turn from the course on which I had been running to trace this creek up . . . but was reluctant to deviate from the line of which I had determined to penetrate."

Resolute in pursuing his objective of the centre of the continent Sturt therefore declined to deviate from the 332 deg. N.N.W. course he had set. However, he spent an extra day camped at this delectable waterhole.

A full account of Sturt's attempt to reach central Australia from his depot at Fort Grey is outside the scope of this paper. However, some account of the explorer's work in the relevant Cooper's Creek region may perhaps be noted with advantage from Sturt's narrative.

### STURT'S NORTHWARD PROGRESS

Continuing his narrative Sturt relates that they left their camping site (on this channel of the Cooper) on the morning of the 20 August and after ascending a high point to the westward, he obtained an extensive view of the surrounding country. He says "the country was very depressed both to the north and north-west. The plains had almost the character of lagoons since it was evident they were sometimes inundated, from the water mark on the sandhills by which they were partly separated from one another. Below us on our course there was a large plain of about eight miles in breadth . . . the plain we next rode across was evidently subject to floods in many parts; the soil was a mixture of sand and clay.

"There were large bare patches on the plains that had been full of water not long before, but too shallow to have lasted long and were now dry." These are the claypans which are a feature of this country.

"We crossed plains of still greater extent than any we had hitherto seen . . . vegetation seemed to suffer from their liability to inundation . . . the line of the creeks, which were a perfectly new feature in the country surprised me greatly.

The tract we passed over on this day was certainly more subject to overflow than usual. Large flats of polygonum and plains having rents and fissures in them succeeded those I have already described."

This is Sturt's description of the flood plains of the Cooper where this stream, after long maintaining a main channel containing large waterholes, ultimately fans out on the dry plains between Innamincka and the barren Lake Eyre depression.

### THE GREAT STONY DESERT

On 24 August Sturt says: "We left at 7 in the morning, taking up our usual N.N.W. course, from which up to this point we had not deviated . . . at eight miles, however, a wall of sand suddenly rose before us directly across our course. For 20 miles, we toiled over as distressing a country as can be imagined, each succeeding sand ridge assumed a steeper and more rugged character . . . I had little hope of finding water. . . ."

However, they found a pool of water "covering no small space among rocks and stones" after examining the neighbourhood from a nearby knoll. Making camp near this water, Sturt walked to the extremity of a sandy ridge about two miles distant.

"On arriving at this point we saw an immense plain occupying more than one-half of the horizon. A number of sandy ridges terminated in this plain like so many headlands projecting into the sea. The plain itself was of a dark purple hue. It appeared to be perfectly level . . . otherwise without vegetation, and its horizon was like that of the ocean.

"In the direction I was about to proceed, nothing was to be seen but the gloomy stone-clad plain of an extent I could not form any just idea. Ignorant of the existence of a similar geographical feature in any other part of the world, I was at a loss to define its nature."

Sturt had reached the notorious Stony Desert now bearing his name which lies between the courses of the Cooper and the Diamantina in the north-east corner of South Australia.

Here is Sturt's own description of this fearful stretch of country:

"On travelling over the plain (26 August 1845), we found it undulating with shiny hollows, in which it was evident water sometimes collects. The stones, with which the ground was so thickly covered as to exclude vegetation, were of different lengths, from one inch to six. They had been rounded by attrition, were coated with oxide of iron, and evenly distributed. In going over this dreary waste,

the horses left no tracks, and that of the cart was only visible here and there.

"From the spot in which we stopped no object of any kind broke the line of horizon . . . the fragments covering this singular feature were all of the same kind of rock, indurated or compact quartz . . . the poor animals, loose as they were, did not venture to trespass on the adamantine plain by which they were on all sides surrounded."

### THE RETREAT

Sturt pressed on north-west across the flooded country of the Diamantina River (as the river was dry at the time he did not recognise it as the course of an important river system), and then striking difficult sandridge country, altered course northerly where he encountered and named Eyre's Creek (now usually referred to as the Mulligan).

He followed this watercourse northwards till it appeared to peter out, and then struck off to the west of north in his determined bid to penetrate to the Centre.

The hapless explorers now entered the waterless confines of the Simpson Desert, and with further progress thwarted by apparently never-ending, barren sandridges, Sturt reluctantly gave up the struggle and returned to the Cooper's Creek country en route back to the depot at Fort Grey more than 400 miles distant.

The farthest point reached by Sturt in his push towards the Centre is given in his journal as latitude 24 deg. 30 min. S longitude 138 deg. 15 min. E. This today would be nearly on the border of Queensland-Northern Territory, and almost due west of the township of Bedourie.

### A SECOND ATTEMPT

Sturt records:

"We gained the Park and joined Mr. Stuart at the stockade on the evening of the 2 October (1845) after an absence of seven weeks during which we had ridden more than 800 miles . . . the stockade had been erected and really looked very well. It was built just as I had directed with the flag flying at the entrance. I availed myself of the opportunity therefore to call it 'Fort Grey' after His Excellency the then Governor of South Australia."

This tenacious man, after only a few days respite at the depot, set out again on 9 October in a second attempt to penetrate the sandhill barriers to the north, this time taking a course more to the east of his previous route.

Arriving at the Strzelecki on the morning of 11 October

he turned northwards and on 13 October he arrived at the main channels of the Cooper.

Sturt reports:

"We were brought up by our arrival on the banks of a magnificent channel. Large sheets of water to our left covered with wildfowl. Flooded gum-trees of large size grew on its banks and appearance altogether imposing. . . . We were again stopped by another creek still broader and finer than the first. The breadth of its channel was more than 200 yards. Its banks were 15 to 18 feet high and it had splendid sheets of water both above and below us."

On this attempt, Sturt reached a northernmost point given by him as latitude 25 deg. 54 min. longitude 139 deg. 25 min., which on today's map would be inside the Queensland border just west of Birdsville.

Prospects for advancing further were considered impracticable so Sturt returned to that oasis and haven of refuge in the wilderness which he had recently discovered—Cooper's Creek.

#### INVESTIGATION OF COOPER'S CREEK

This time, he determined to explore the watercourse and he says:

"On 29 October we commenced our progress up the Creek, but halted at six miles on a beautiful sheet of water and with every promise of success."

For several days he followed upstream the main channel of the Cooper, in this sector clearly defined and containing large waterholes, with stretches of dry bed between. This portion of Cooper's Creek was 16 years later to become the well-beaten track of Burke and Wills during their losing struggle for survival.

Having progressed well into what was later Nappa Merrie Station in Queensland, Sturt found the Creek becoming fragmented into dry channels and the outlook of the country (in that dry season) deteriorated badly.

The expedition members were nearing the end of their supplies and physical endurance, so Sturt retired back down the Creek to the point (given as latitude 27 deg. 44 min. longitude 140 deg. 22 min.) where his investigations began. Ultimately, they got back to the depot by forced marches as all surface water south of the Cooper had by now almost dried up.

The ultimate point reached by Sturt upstream of the Cooper is given in his journal as latitude 27 deg. 47 min. longitude 141 deg. 57 min. If these figures are correct, it seems they got off the Cooper on to its tributary, the Wilson River, coming in from the Grey Ranges in the east. This

would not be hard to do in this country of numerous dry channels and ill-defined watercourses.

### THE NAMING OF COOPER'S CREEK

Charles Sturt wrote:

"Before we finally left the neighbourhood where our hopes had so often been raised and depressed, I gave the name of Cooper's Creek to the fine watercourse we had so anxiously traced, as a proof of my great respect for Mr. Cooper the Judge of South Australia. . . . I would gladly have laid this creek down as a river, but as it had no current, I did not feel myself justified in so doing. Had it been nearer the located districts of South Australia its discovery would have been a matter of some importance. As it is, we know not what changes or speculations may lead the white man to its banks."

If he could return today and see the development of the pastoral industry, the airstrips, road and station buildings (not to mention the motor traffic of visiting historians and tourists), Sturt would appreciate the vital importance of this great inland watercourse he had the honour of discovering.

### MEMORIALS TO STURT

Today, a large memorial cairn is erected near the main road beside the ruins of the old hotel at the site of the abandoned Innamincka township. This cairn contains two heavy bronze plaques with these inscriptions:

**CAPTAIN CHARLES STURT** discovered Cooper Creek about fifteen miles west of this place on 13 October 1845 in his attempt to reach the centre of Australia. His work prompted further exploration resulting in the pastoral occupation of this locality and Western Queensland.

Erected 1944.

Burke, Wills, Gray and King, the first to cross the continent from South to North, passed here 17 December 1860.

The sole survivor, King, was cared for by the natives and was rescued by Howitt 15 September 1861.

Erected 1944.

This memorial cairn was put up as part of the Sturt centenary celebrations in 1944 by local pastoralists (E. G. Conrick, G. & E. A. Brooks, S. Kidman & Co. and Beltana Pastoral Company).

There is also a memorial in Birdsville, erected on this same occasion, with tablet inscribed as follows:—

Central Australia Exploring Expedition.

Captain Charles Sturt with a few companions twice



entered the Birdsville region in September and October 1845.

His discoveries opened the way to the north for later explorers and resulted in the pastoral occupation of western Queensland.

Erected 1944

This memorial was erected by the Diamantina Shire Council. The unveiling ceremony took place on 1 September 1944, when an enthusiastic assemblage participated, including W. H. Green (President), and D. A. O'Brien (Hon. Secretary) of the Royal Geographical Society (Queensland Branch), and other visitors from Brisbane. R. Gunther (Chairman of the Shire Council) presided at the unveiling which was performed by Mr. Green.

### MITCHELL DISCOVERS THE BARCOO

Sturt turned back from tracing the Cooper upstream on 6 November 1845. Less than a year later (in September 1846) Sir Thomas Livingstone Mitchell (one of the "greats" in Australian exploration) discovered the Barcoo River, which he named the Victoria after his "gracious Sovereign, Queen Victoria."

However, he did not follow it far enough to find that its course continued inland, and was, in fact, the headwaters of Sturt's Cooper's Creek. Mitchell was obsessed with the notion



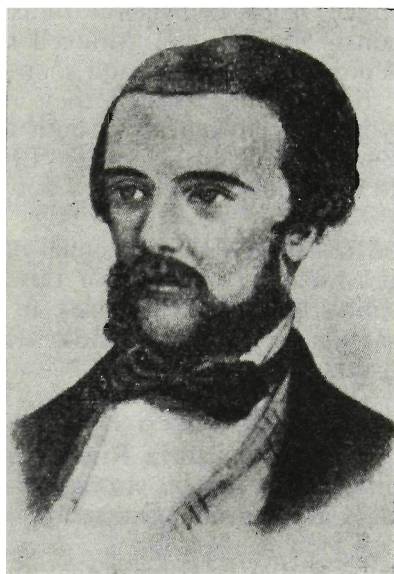
SIR THOMAS LIVINGSTONE MITCHELL

that a great inland river would be found north-west of the Darling, flowing north into the Gulf of Carpentaria, enabling a practicable route to be opened up along its course, affording access to the unsettled northern coastal regions of the Colony.

He set out from Parramatta on 17 November 1845, and subsequently arriving at the northern reaches of the Darling, he followed its headwaters north along the Narran, Culgoa, and Balonne Rivers. On 12 April, they reached and formed a depot at the natural bridge of rocks on the Balonne, where the township of St. George now stands, being long known as St. George's Bridge. He continued north along the Balonne to the junction of the Cogoon, and followed the course of that river discovering and naming Mount Abundance, in what he described as a beautiful pastoral district

Passing over a low range to the west, he came on another promising river, the course of which tended north-south, to which he gave the native name of Maranoa. Here they formed another depot with E. B. Kennedy (the expedition's second in command) in charge.

On 4 June, Mitchell started out with a small party to continue his exploration towards the Gulf of Carpentaria, following up the course of the Maranoa for 11 days. Then he struck out in a north-westerly direction, crossing the broken tableland near its head, and reached the headwaters of the Warrego (later explored by Kennedy).



EDMUND B. KENNEDY

He continued north across the watersheds, first on to the Nogoa River, and then finally the headwaters of the Belyando, where he found he was now close (too close for Mitchell) to the route so recently followed by Leichhardt on his great Northern journey.

On his way north into the tropics, Mitchell found a stream which flowed into a large lake which he named Lake Salvator, but was disappointed to find no stream led from it. He named the valley, Salvator Rose, and gave a glowing account of its scenic beauty in his log. It is now the Salvator Rose National Park.

Mitchell retreated from the Belyando back to Salvator Rose which he reached on 5 September 1845, and formed a depot there. He now proceeded westwards with two men and a native guide towards the present-day township of Tambo.

Crossing the divide he came on to very good country and struck the headwaters of a river which he named the Victoria (the Barcoo). He thought he had at last discovered the hoped for stream which would lead to the Gulf of Carpentaria. He followed down the course of this stream which inclined towards the north-west.

On 23 September, a large stream joined the river from the north-east and was named the Alice (after the Queen's second daughter). Running short of provisions, he decided to turn back, being well satisfied that his Victoria River would eventually lead to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

This was a prize piece of wishful thinking, to which Kennedy was soon to give the lie. Mitchell returned to the Salvator Rose Depot on 6 October, and soon set out for the main depot on the Maranoa, which they reached on 19 October. Following their own tracks south to the Balonne River, Mitchell camped at St. George's Bridge and sent Kennedy south to reconnoitre the country between there and the Darling.

He found the Moonie River, the channel of which tended north-south, and Mitchell retired down this stream to the Darling (7 December). And so on back to Sydney where they all arrived safe and sound after a most successful exploring expedition lasting 13 months.

### KENNEDY TRACES BARCOO

Although he traced his Victoria River (the Barcoo) for only ten days, Mitchell asserted his strong belief that it flowed into the Gulf of Carpentaria. On return to Sydney, he reported:

"I was convinced that its estuary was the Gulf of Carpentaria; at all events the country is open and well-watered

for a direct route thereto. That the river is the most important in Australia, increasing as it does by successive tributaries and the mere product of distant ranges, admits of no dispute; and the downs and plains of Central Australia seem sufficient to supply the whole world with animal food."

After exploring the upper reaches of the Barcoo, this far-reaching conclusion about the "downs and plains of Central Australia" seems rather a long shot. The Governmental heads were, however, not prepared to accept as authoritative Surveyor-General Mitchell's opinion about his recently-discovered great inland river.

It was therefore decided to dispatch another expedition at once to more fully explore Mitchell's Victoria River. Command of this expedition was given to Edmund B. Kennedy, who left Sydney in March 1847 with a light party of eight men. Having the advantage of Mitchell's explorations, Kennedy took a shorter, more direct route to Mitchell's Victoria River, reaching the limit of the Surveyor-General's journey down the river by 13 August 1847.

After proceeding for two days, he found the river took a south-south-west course, and the supply of water became scarce. Leaving the bulk of the party behind, Kennedy rode on for 12 miles and found the river improved, being subsequently joined by a fine stream from the east, which Kennedy called the Thomson (after Deas Thomson, the Colonial Secretary of New South Wales).

However, the country deteriorated as he proceeded, and the river broke up into dry channels, with water daily becoming scarcer. Pushing on, they reached a small waterhole by 17 September, but without any sign of vegetation, and Kennedy ordered a halt. He took one companion and went out to search in all directions for water but in vain, finding only red sandhill country of Sturt's experience.

Conditions were grim with his horses starving and the men suffering severely, so Kennedy decided to beat a retreat. However, he had exploded Mitchell's theory that along the banks of the Victoria was the great "high road" to the North Coast of the Continent.

On his way back to Sydney, Kennedy explored the Warrego River, recently discovered by Mitchell, and tracing its course south past the town-to-be of Charleville, found it flowed through a well-pastured country, but finally running out in flat country in waterless channels without reaching the Darling system. He then struck out easterly on a journey of 80 miles across barren, scrubby country to the Culgoa River, which was waterless but apparently liable to floods.

## A. C. GREGORY'S EXPEDITION

In 1858, A. C. Gregory led an expedition into the interior in search of the lost Leichhardt. Following the Barcoo down, he found it was in fact the main headwaters of Sturt's Cooper's Creek. This expedition finally linked up the exploration of Sturt and Mitchell, and demonstrated that Mitchell's great Victoria River, which Gregory re-named the Barcoo after its aboriginal name, was not the great northern river of Mitchell's dreams.

The Barcoo joins Kennedy's Thomson, and below the junction, just north of Windorah, the united stream becomes known as Cooper's Creek. Thus, as the residents out there will tell you, "*It takes two rivers in that part of Australia to make a Creek.*" Gregory's expedition was the next visitation to that region of Cooper's Creek, initially discovered and explored by Sturt.

After reaching the Barcoo waters on 16 April 1858, Gregory followed it down to its junction with the Thomson, and then back to the junction. He followed down the united stream (Cooper's Creek), and soon found himself in difficulties with the countless barren-fissured plains with sandhill interludes, until he reached the section explored by Sturt.

He then followed down the main channel of the Cooper until (west of the future settlement of Innamincka) it fanned out into many dry channels, losing themselves amongst sandhills and flooded plains. (Burke and Wills were faced with the same dilemma three years later.)

Gregory wisely turned back and returning to the junction of Strzelecki Creek, followed this separate channel south-westerly, until he reached the settled areas near Mt. Hopeless, after passing between Lakes Blanche and Callabonna. (Strzelecki Creek is not a tributary of the Cooper, but a separate channel of that stream down which it overflows in time of flood towards Lake Blanche. It is distinct from the main course of the Cooper which is westerly to Lake Eyre.)

Gregory was accompanied by his brother and seven men, and was equipped for rapid travelling, taking with them only packhorses to carry their provisions. He safely accomplished a most successful journey, which fact perhaps obversely contributes to the lack of glamour and notoriety associated with this great but lesser known expedition through inland Australia.

Sir Augustus Charles Gregory (1819-1905) was born in Nottinghamshire, and spent his younger days in Western Australia, where he carried out some important explorations. He later settled in Queensland where he held the office of Surveyor-General and became a member of the Queensland

Legislative Council. He was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society.

### THE DRAMA AND TRAGEDY OF BURKE AND WILLS

After A. C. Gregory's expedition, the next white men to visit the Cooper's Creek area were the advance party of the Burke and Wills Expedition, consisting of the two leaders, William Brahe, who was left in charge of the depot, King and Gray who accompanied the leaders on their dash to the Gulf of Carpentaria, two other men (Patton and McDonough) and a Sepoy camel man (Dost Mahomet).

On 11 November 1860, 23 days out from Menindie, they struck the Wilson River, tributary of the Cooper, at latitude 27 deg. 49 min., and longitude 142 deg. 20 min., this being about 15 miles due west of the present Nocundra Hotel.

They followed the course of this intermittent stream down to the Cooper, and set up camp there within the boundaries of the present Nappa Merrie cattle station.

Later Burke moved camp further down the Cooper and on 6 December he set up Depot Camp 65 beside a large coolibah tree on the northern bank of a fine stretch of water.

Moorehead ("Cooper's Creek") describes the site:

"It was in many ways a beautiful place with the water curving round, fairly thick trees to give them shade and an outlook across the creek to the green polygonum reeds and the belt of eucalypts on the other side."

This is a fair description from my own observations of this place.

The story of the crossing of the continent from this depot on Cooper's Creek to the Gulf of Carpentaria and return is outside the scope of this paper.

### RETURN FROM CARPENTARIA

u. We will take up the story on the return of the explorers to Depot Camp 65 on 21 April 1861. They found that the depot party under Brahe had pulled out and started south for the Darling River. By a tragic twist of fate on the evening of the very day the depot party left (21 April), Burke, Wills and King staggered wearily into the depot after their marathon walk to Carpentaria and back in exactly 18 weeks and one day (16 December 1860-21 April 1861). Wills noted the "DIG" message cut in the Depot Tree already marked "BLXV." They dug up the provisions and the note left by the retiring depot party.

After some discussion, Burke formulated a plan to return to civilisation via Mt. Hopeless to Adelaide, following the route successfully used and pioneered by Gregory three years

before, rather than try to retrace their steps to Menindie (in the wake of the retiring depot party). This, Burke argued, involved a much greater distance (about 400 miles) than Mt. Hopeless (about 150 miles). Burke has been criticised for deciding on this course of action but it is all too easy to be wise after the event in the light of knowledge not available at the time.

### TOWARDS MT. HOPELESS

In his Journal, W. J. Wills describes their movements down Cooper's Creek with two only surviving camels on the chosen route back to civilisation. He says:

"The advance party of the Victorian Exploring Expedition consisting of Burke, Wills and King (Gray being dead) having returned from Carpentaria on 21 April in an exhausted and weak state, and finding that the depot party left at Cooper's Creek had started for the Darling" (that same day)—"started down Cooper's Creek for Adelaide via Mt. Hopeless on the morning of 23 April (1861), intending to follow as nearly as possible the route taken by Gregory; by so doing, they hope to be able to recruit themselves and the camels whilst sauntering slowly down the Creek. . . ."

Little did they know of the difficult nature of the country which lay ahead when the lovely waterholes in the main stream of the Cooper around Depot Camp 65 petered out some 40 miles downstream, and the Cooper lost itself in a maze of dry desert channels. On the day of departure (Tuesday, 23 April) Wills says:

"We only went about five miles and camped at half past eleven on a billabong where the feed was pretty good . . . the weather is delightful, days agreeably warm, but the nights very chilly. The latter is more noticeable from our deficiency in clothing, the depot party having taken all the reserve things back with them to the Darling."

This was April, and winter had hardly started. In this region, like most of inland Australia, cold frosty nights are regular occurrences in the winter months. Burke and Wills were to suffer terribly from exposure to the cold in their last surviving few weeks in June.

### ABORIGINES BARTER FISH

Next day (24 April) their start was delayed by a party of friendly blacks from whom they bartered "about 12 pounds of fish for a few pieces of straps and some matches, etc."

They proceeded for a few more miles down the Creek before camping. That night they slept well (helped no doubt

by a good feed of fish), despite the bitter cold and the dew on the ground in the early morning.

In the morning (25 April), the blacks appeared with more welcome fish, in return for which they were given some sugar which they enjoyed. After three hours of travel, Burke called a halt when they reached an immense waterhole several miles long. This would be on the stretch of the Cooper about midway between Depot Camp 65 and the present site of the Innamincka Homestead.

Wills records that there were many birds feeding there, but they were shy and hard to shoot. During the morning they had a mishap with one of the camels which fell down on a rocky stretch and was cut and bruised before they could get him up again. This may have contributed to the death of the two camels which occurred in a few days' time.

### "SPLENDID SALTBUUSH COUNTRY"

Next morning (26 April), they were up early and followed a native path for a while. After breakfast, they continued on again through what Wills describes as "the most splendid saltbush country you could possibly wish to see."

They now arrived at the site of their previous camp, the last on their return journey from the Gulf and from which they made their exhausting forced march of approximately 30 miles back to Depot Camp 65 on 21 April (only five days previously). They were now apparently in good spirits and Wills wrote: "This comparative rest and the change in diet have worked wonders."

However, this hopeful state of affairs for the ill-fated explorers was short-lived. They now prepared to enter strange territory towards their objective of Mt. Hopeless (more than 100 miles away to the south-west) and the settled areas, outposts from Adelaide. So far the Cooper's Creek country they were traversing was fair indeed, compared with what lay ahead.

They were now entering that section of the Cooper first encountered by Sturt in August, 1845, on his journey furthest north, 16 years previously.

### ONE CAMEL GOES—ONE LEFT

Serious misfortune occurred on Sunday, 28 April. Let Wills tell the story:

"Sunday, April 28. From Camp No. 5. Morning fine and calm but rather chilly. Started at a quarter to five a.m. following down the bed of a creek in a westerly direction, by moonlight. Our stage was, however, very short for about a mile; one of the camels (Landa) got bogged by



the side of a waterhole, and although we tried every means in our power, we found it impossible to get him out. . . .

"Monday, April 29. From Camp No. 6. Finding Landa still in the hole we made a few attempts at extricating him and then shot him; and after breakfast commenced cutting off what flesh we could get at for jerking.

"Wednesday, May 1. From Camp No. 6. Started at twenty minutes to nine having loaded our only camel Rajah with the most necessary and useful articles, and packed up a small swag each of bedding and clothing for our own shoulders."

They were now left with only one camel and their plight had taken a very grave turn. What if this remaining camel failed?

### COOPER DRIES UP

Wills' Journal continues:

"Thursday, May 2. Camp No. 7. Following down the left bank of the creek in a westerly direction, we came at a distance of six miles on a lot of natives. . . . Rajah showed signs of being done up. He had been trembling greatly all the morning. On this account his load was further lightened. . . ."

Their progress was arrested when the water petered out in a forest of dry box trees.

They next went off in a northerly direction on another arm of the creek and stuck at it for two days before they were again confronted with barrenness. Rajah was feeling the strain, getting increasingly stiff. The writing was on the wall for poor Rajah (and for poor Burke and Wills).

On 5 May Wills went out by himself to reconnoitre the surrounding country. He mounted a sandhill from which the view disclosed lines of timber to the north and east, but south and west, the direction in which they wanted to go, there was nothing but sand ridges and bare plains. Says Wills:

"This dreary prospect offered no inducement to proceed."

### GLOOMY TIDINGS

He conveyed these gloomy tidings to his two mates and they moved a little further up the creek to camp.

Next day, Monday, 6 May, he wrote:

"The present state of things is not calculated to raise our spirits much. The rations are rapidly diminishing; our clothing, especially the boots, are all going to pieces. . . . the camel is completely done up and can scarcely get along. . . . I suppose this will end in our having to live like the blacks for a few months."

Then—

"Tuesday, May 7. Camp No. 9. Breakfasted at daylight, but when about to start found that the camel would not rise even without any load on his back. After making every attempt to get him up we were obliged to leave him to himself. Mr. Burke and I started down the creek to reconnoitre. At about 11 miles we came to some blacks fishing . . . they gave us some stuff they call bedgery or pedgery. It has a highly intoxicating effect when chewed even in small quantities. It appears to be the dried stems and leaves of some shrub."

They spent the night (7 May) in a gunyah which the blacks had placed at their disposal. The blacks on this part of the Cooper were nothing if not hospitable to their uninvited guests. Next day (8 May) Burke rejoined King while Wills went on alone reconnoitering downstream. But the outlook was unfavourable and Wills says:

"Finding that the creek turned greatly towards the north I returned to the blacks' encampment . . . they invited me to stay and was even more hospitably entertained than before . . . supplied with plenty of fish and nardoo as well as a couple of nice fat rats. The latter found most delicious. They were baked in their skins. . . ."

### DEATH OF THE LAST CAMEL

Wills, on arrival back at his own camp, found that Rajah, the camel, being unable to move any more, had been shot. Now, indeed, the plight of the three stranded explorers had reached a critical stage! They were left to walk and carry all their gear on their back as best they could, which meant their circuit of action was severely limited.

Their plan for vacating the oasis-like region of Cooper's Creek and reaching Mt. Hopeless appeared a hopeless prospect. Wills' prophecy, "I suppose this will end in our having to live like the blacks for a few months," contained in his Journal for Monday, 6 May, had come to pass, but sadly he and Burke were destined to survive less than two months.

On 11 May he wrote:

"I have now my turn at meat jerking and must devise some means for trapping birds and rats which is a pleasant prospect after our dashing trip to Carpentaria having to hang about Cooper's Creek living like the blacks."

### STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

The blacks who had kept them supplied with nardoo now disappeared from this sector of the Creek, and the explorers found themselves left to their own devices for survival. They bravely formulated a plan for one last supreme effort to get off the creek and reach Mt. Hopeless.

This plan called for a forced march of 30 or 40 miles across the plains to the south-west till they reached water and a livable camping site from which to battle on further towards civilisation. They spent 15 May in "planting" the stores they could not carry on their backs, and in preparing for their long walk into the unknown.

Next day, 16 May, they set out with packs on shoulders and carrying billies of water. They had nardoo cakes and a supply of jerked camel meat. Soon after starting, they came upon a whole field of the nardoo plant growing near the foot of a sandhill.

Pushing on they covered eight miles the first day and found their packs too heavy. Next day they buried more of their stores and pressed on again for the next six days. They marched about 45 miles south-west from the creek without finding water and with no favourable prospects in the nature of the country.

This country today comprises part of the vast Innamincka cattle station of 6,000 square miles and contains practically no surface water except after rain. The Strzelecki Creek, which extends in the direction of the explorers' route, is a dry watercourse most of the time, and only contains water when the Cooper rises in flood and overflows into this channel near the site of the old Innamincka township.

To those who have travelled the Strzelecki Track from the vicinity of Mt. Hopeless (today an outstation of the large Murnpeowie Run) to Innamincka, the enormity of the task facing the poorly equipped explorers to reach the Mt. Hopeless area from Cooper's Creek on foot in a dry season will be apparent.

### BACK TO COOPER'S CREEK

Little wonder then that they sat down among the sandhills to rest after covering 45 miles of waterless inhospitable country and then turned back to regain the lifeline of Cooper's Creek. On 24 May they struggled in to their old camping ground on the Cooper, and immediately set about the collection of their locally grown survival product, the nardoo seed.

For the next few weeks Wills' Journal chronicles a desperate but losing struggle for survival with the winter on them and very little personal attire and gear left in a condition to combat the cold nights.

They moved about along the creek trying to keep contact with the blacks, but their benefactors kept on the move and were hard to catch up with by the weary explorers. The abortive forced march of approximately 90 miles towards Mt. Hopeless and return undoubtedly contributed to their

rapidly deteriorating physical condition. Unless a relief party soon found them their days were numbered.

One remarkable thing was the clarity and lucidity with which Wills maintained his diary right up to the end, although he must have found it an effort to concentrate as he weakened towards death.

On 30 May Wills travelled alone up the creek to the depot where he deposited his journals and a note of their desperate plight. He saw no signs of the depot having been visited. Most of their last few weeks were spent collecting and preparing nardoo as their staple diet which was helped occasionally by fish supplied by the kindly blacks.

### NARDOO NOT ENOUGH

On 7 June Wills makes mention of the serious deterioration in their physical condition, and for the next fortnight they spent most of their time preparing nardoo for food while Wills in particular grew steadily weaker. In his own words we have the poignant story of a dying man:

"Thursday, June 20. Night and morning very cold, sky clear. I am completely reduced by the effects of the cold and starvation. Mr. Burke at home pounding seed; he finds himself getting very weak in the legs. King holds out by far the best; the food seems to agree with him pretty well. I cannot understand this nardoo at all, it certainly will not agree with me in any form. We are now reduced to it alone and we manage to get from 4 to 5 pounds per day between us. . . ."

### THE END DRAWS NEAR

"Friday, June 21. I feel much weaker than ever and can scarcely crawl out of the mia-mia. Unless relief comes in some form or other, I cannot possibly last more than a fortnight. It is a great consolation, at least, in this position of ours to know that we have done all we could, and that our deaths will rather be the result of the mismanagement of others than of any rash acts of our own. . . ."

Here is a man facing death fairly and squarely in the face, but his spirit is undaunted and his intellect unimpaired.

"June 22. Mr. Burke and King out for nardoo. The former returned much fatigued. I am so weak today as to be unable to get on my feet.

"June 23. All hands at home. I am so weak as to be incapable of crawling out of the mia-mia. King holds out well, but Mr. Burke finds himself weaker every day.

"June 24. A fearful night . . . southerly gale sprang up and continued throughout the greater portion of the night;

the cold was intense and it seemed as if one would be shrivelled up.

"June 23 (sic—he is now getting his dates mixed up). Mr. Burke and King . . . both getting weaker every day. The cold plays the deuce with us from the small amount of clothing we have. My wardrobe consists of a wideawake, a merino shirt, a regatta shirt without sleeves, the remains of a pair of flannel trousers, two pairs of socks in rags and a waistcoat of which I have managed to keep the pockets together. The others are no better off."

What an outfit for a man fatigued and starved nigh unto death and living in the open (except for primitive abo. gun-yahs) out in the wilds of central Australia in the middle of winter.

### LAST WORDS OF A DYING MAN

"June 24 (sic). Mr. Burke and King are preparing to go up the creek in search of the blacks. They will leave me some nardoo, wood and water with which I must do the best I can until they return. I think this is almost our last chance . . . without some change I see little chance for any of us . . . I could not last long on the nardoo, even if a supply could be kept up.

"June 26 (sic). I am weaker than ever, although I have a good appetite and relish the nardoo much, but it seems to give us no nutriment, and the birds here are so shy as not to be got at . . . nothing now but the greatest good luck can now save any of us; and as for myself, I may live four or five days if the weather continues warm. My pulse (sic) are at forty-eight and very weak and my legs and arms are nearly skin and bone. I can only look out like Mr. Micawber 'for something to turn up' . . ."

Although death is imminent, this brave man faces the situation with apparent calm and equanimity, putting his last thoughts on paper and even philosophising a little.

Moorehead ("Cooper's Creek") says "a sort of dreaming fatalism, a twilight of the mind was beginning to overtake Wills." His mind was clearly functional, although his body had reached the end of its tether.

### LAST LETTER

Wills also wrote a last letter to his father dated 27 June (1861), only a matter of a few days at most before he expired. This letter is worth reading. Moorehead remarks:

"It is astonishing now to examine this document; there is not a word misspelt, hardly a comma forgotten, or a fault in grammar or style. The firm, thin, sloping hand-

writing is wonderfully clear, and this trained pragmatical mind holds on to the end."

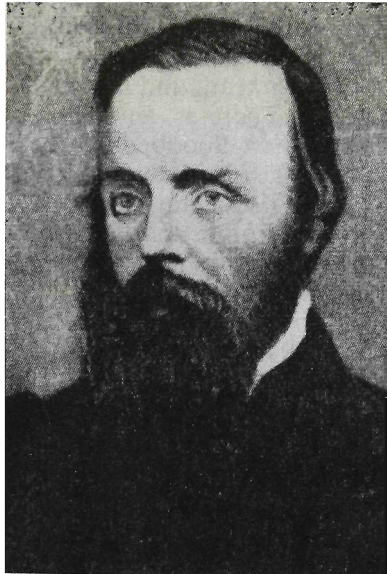
Indeed, here was no ordinary young man of 27. One cannot read the last entries in the Journal without feeling a great admiration and respect for this brave young man of culture, science, and gentle disposition. He had withstood a tremendous physical ordeal. He and his leader, Robert O'Hara Burke, had covered vast distances and had achieved much. (Had they survived to return to Melbourne, they would assuredly have been welcomed as national heroes—"nothing succeeds like success" where public sentiment is concerned.)

He went to his final rest out there in the sandy wastes of the Cooper floodbed in an aboriginal mia-mia, quietly, all alone with nature. But he first wrote his father an interesting letter which in a few words summed up the accomplishments of the Expedition.

The last Journal entry is dated 26 June, but he confused his dates towards the end of June. This perhaps should read 27 June, the same date as the letter to his father.

### BURKE SUCCUMBS

The exact date is similarly not clear as to which day Burke and King left Wills to go up the creek in search of the blacks. It might have been 29 June if the dates in Wills' Journal can be amended correctly. We rely on King's narrative after he



ROBERT O'HARA BURKE

was rescued as to what happened after he and Burke left Wills. Burke did not keep a log or journal but left this work to his able deputy.

It appears that they only travelled for two days up the creek before Burke collapsed on the ground and could proceed no further. He spent a cold night, speaking very little, and at dawn King found him almost speechless. At 8 o'clock he was dead. Before dying he got King to place his pistol in his right hand, and he insisted that he be left lying on the ground as he knew King was too weak to dig a grave. These were interesting gestures on the part of a dying man.

The date of Burke's death depends on the recollection of John King as to the events which took place after they left Wills in his mia-mia further down the creek, and is also related to the actual date of their leaving him. The most likely date seems to be 1 July (i.e. the morning of the third day after leaving Wills, assuming this to be 29 June).

After leaving the dead Burke, King spent several days searching for the natives, and then made his way back to where they had left Wills. On arrival, he found Wills lying there, peaceful in death and evidently he had never moved from his bed in the gunyah.

Just how long he had lain there before death can only be surmised, but it could not have been more than a few days. Perhaps he and his leader expired within a matter of hours of one another.

The actual spot where Burke died is known, and a small memorial cairn of cemented stones with bronze plaque marks the spot. It is out in the bush about a mile upstream of present Innamincka Homestead, and is visited by enterprising travellers and tourists. There is an old coolibah tree still growing there in the sandy floodbed of the Cooper, and I believe this is the actual tree under which Robert O'Hara Burke lay down never to rise again, on or about 1 July 1861. There are today no discernible markings cut into this tree, the lower trunk of which is buried in sand, heaped up by flood waters of the Cooper.

#### WHERE WILLS DIED

The place where Wills died is not marked by any cairn or memorial. The late Alfred Towner of "Russleigh," Longreach, who conducted research into the history of the Burke and Wills Expedition, claimed to have located the spot, which is about nine miles downstream from Burke's death-bed. It is not readily accessible being more than six miles from existing roads in the area.

A suggestion has been made for the erection in the area of

a memorial cairn with appropriately worded plaque to record the death of William John Wills and pay tribute to the man indissolubly linked with Burke in the name of the Expedition handed down in history.

It has been suggested that this memorial to Wills might be placed, not out in the Never-Never where he died, but beside the main road adjacent to the Innamincka crossing of Cooper's Creek, where it may be seen by all travellers through the area.

It has been said: "*Wills, as is generally known, was the shining light of the great and ill-fated expedition.*" A gallant, capable and well-educated man, he was one of the noblest characters in the story of Australian exploration.

As Howitt records: "He was the only one of the party who could take the necessary observations. It was he who really took Burke across the continent and brought him back to Cooper's Creek. Without Wills, Burke would have been absolutely helpless." (Royal Geog. Socy. (Sth. Aust. Branch) Journal Vol. XXIX, 1927-8.)

#### THE A.I.M. NURSING SERVICE

The Very Rev. John Flynn, O.B.E., D.D. (1880-1951), of the Presbyterian Church of Australia — "Flynn of the Inland"—established the Australian Inland Mission in 1912. A very important component of the A.I.M. was its Nursing Service. Some 400 trained nurses served in "Flynn's Mob" in the first 48 years of its existence till 1960.

Some of the most rugged services of the A.I.M. in a typically man's country were performed by the tender hands of these nursing sisters. Sir Robert Menzies has said:

"The spirit which has achieved greatness for our nation is exemplified in the work of the Sisters of the A.I.M. . . . may I humbly pay tribute to the devotion, ability and self-sacrifice of all the sisters of the A.I.M."

#### THE ELIZABETH SYMON NURSING HOME (1928-54)

Situated at Innamincka on Cooper's Creek, this nursing home was an A.I.M. outpost which served the lonely north-eastern corner of South Australia and the lower south-western corner of Queensland "with a ministry of healing and cheer for 25 years."

The Home was opened on 11 May 1928, with Sisters Claire Stewart and Elsie Edgar, and closed in 1951 when Sisters R. H. Harmes and M. Harmes were in charge.

From 1924 to the establishment of the Home in 1928, Border Nurses, who were billeted at station homesteads in



the area, looked after the health of the lonely Inlanders in the Cooper's Creek region.

The moving spirit behind the establishment of the Nursing Home at Innamincka was one J. H. Symon of "Manoah," Upper Sturt, South Australia, who on 22 March 1924 put forward in writing a proposal for the establishment of the Home and offered to contribute £1,500 towards its erection.

Dr. George Simpson, Medical Adviser to the A.I.M., travelled up from Melbourne by car with the Rev. J. Andrew Barber, A.I.M. Acting Superintendent, who opened and dedicated the Home. Dr. Simpson has written:

"We followed the route of the early explorers Charles Sturt and Burke and Wills. The records of their tedious progress gave fascinating interest to our comfortable journey. For them the Innamincka district brought tragic disappointment. We found there a just completed and fully furnished Home, an oasis in Sturt's Stony Desert."

Most of what we know of life and times at the Elizabeth Symon Nursing Home is admirably related in Sister Elizabeth Burchill's valuable historical book "*Innamincka*." In it, Miss Burchill recalls the notice of her appointment, viz.: "Sisters Currey and Burchill are appointed to take charge of Nursing Home at Innamincka, South Australia, the two years' term to begin in September (1930)."

On their way up in September 1930 to Innamincka, they crossed the notorious Cobbler. The description of this "desert waste of trackless sand as far as the eye could see," about 30 miles of it, starting 15 miles north of Mt. Hopeless, makes interesting reading. However, today the Cobbler presents a much less fearsome aspect and a made road (part of the Strzelecki "Track") enables this region to be traversed quickly and comfortably by modern car.

Dr. George Simpson writes of Innamincka:

"No inland centre has a more romantic background and history. The epic stories of the explorers Charles Sturt and Burke and Wills belong to it and in nursing history it was the territory of the Border Nurse; yet, in the tragedy of progress, Innamincka is ended."

### CLOSURE OF NURSING HOME

In 1954 the Board of the A.I.M. decided that the Elizabeth Symon Nursing Home should be permanently closed and the building and equipment disposed of. Of the once flourishing centre comprising Innamincka Cattle Station, Police Station, Hotel and the A.I.M. Home, the cattle station alone remains today.

The site of old Innamincka township is well marked and

perpetuated by the substantial ruins of the hotel. The A.I.M. Nursing Home was removed in its entirety and re-erected at Mt. Leonard Station near Betoota. The furnishings and fittings were given to the sister Home of the A.I.M. at Birdsville.

Although no township remains, the site has become a most important inland road junction. To the south, the Strzelecki track leads to Murnpeowie, Lyndhurst railhead and Adelaide. To the north-east, a good graded bush road goes across the border into Queensland and to Nappa Merrie Station, the DIG Tree, and easterly to Nocundra and Thargomindah or south-easterly to Tibooburra and Broken Hill.

To the north-west, a graded road crosses the Cooper by a concrete causeway and leads to the Innamincka Station Homestead and airstrip and north to Cordillo Downs, Arrabury and Windorah and Quilpie.

Miss Burchill's introduction to the beauty and fascination of the Inland, shared no doubt by many another traveller, prompted her to record these impressions:

"When the sun died down we discovered the day's finest hour. The desert changed. The overstrong definition of colour softened. Purple mists invaded the shadows and the western sky became a canopy of colour suffused with golden light. . . . We were conscious of the 'Spell of the Inland,' that subtle fascination that we had so often heard about, a deep brooding silence that lay over the ancient land."

### INNAMINCKA

The name Innamincka is compounded of two aboriginal names, "Yenie" meaning "your" and "Mincai" meaning "shelter" or "home."

It has a rather delightful musical sound, spoken slowly, like many other aboriginal names. Elizabeth Burchill says:

"Innamincka district is rich in memories of the ill-fated Burke and Wills Expedition. . . . The many dramatic facets of the expedition captured the imagination of the people as no other of its kind has done . . . of special interest because death of the leaders occurred in the district."

Innamincka was reputed to be a traditional aboriginal trading centre before the coming of the white man. There was trade in "Pituri," a form of native tobacco made from the leaves of the bushy *Duboisia Hopwoodi*, and much valued as a stimulant. Explorer Wills has this entry in his Journal under date 7 May 1861:

"In the evening various members of the tribe came down . . . they also gave us some stuff they call bedgery or pedgery. It has a highly intoxicating effect, when

chewed even in small quantities. It appears to be the dried stems and leaves of some shrub."

Little wonder then that the Innamincka Station Homestead on Cooper's Creek, only five miles from this strategic meeting place of outback roads, is a busy place. It has a Shell bowser to supply motorists with fuel and the station radio does duty as a P.M.G. Telegraph Office. The station manager's wife operates the radio for sending and receiving telegrams and for general communication. The station book-keeper operates the petrol bowser and attends to travellers and visitors. With a property to manage of some 6,000 square miles carrying many thousand head of cattle, the station manager spends much time out on the run.

About one and a half miles upstream from the Homestead and 100 yards from the southern bank of the Cooper's main stream is the old Coolibah tree under which is the cairn erected by the station people in 1938 with bronze plaque attached, reading:

*Robert O'Hara Burke*

*Died here*

*29 June 1861*

### NAPPA MERRIE AND THE "DIG" TREE

Nappamerry (896 square miles) is the name of a pastoral holding owned by the Nappa Merrie Pastoral Company Ltd. of North Terrace, Adelaide. Note the difference in spelling. In the records of the Queensland Lands Department, the name of the pastoral holding is shown as "Nappamerry" and the lessee as "Nappa Merrie" Pastoral Company.

The adjoining pastoral holding called Chastleton on the north bank of the Cooper (1,162 square miles) is owned by the same pastoral company and the two holdings are in fact worked as one cattle station property under the name of Nappa Merrie, with an aggregate area of 2,058 square miles divided roughly through the middle by Cooper's Creek.

The name is compounded of two aboriginal names, "Nappa" meaning "sand hill" and "Merrie" meaning "water-hole." The western boundary of the property is the Queensland-South Australia State Border, and extends in a straight line for 54 miles. The Cooper is joined by an important tributary, the Wilson River, from the south-east near the centre of the run.

The route taken by Burke and Wills on their way north to the Cooper in November 1860 involved the crossing of the State border between Queensland and New South Wales (Queensland had come into existence only the year before—1859) just south of Lake Bulloo. The explorers turned

west from the Bulloo River to cross the Grey Ranges and came on to the Wilson River which they followed down to Cooper's Creek. They established Depot Camp 65 (Fort Wills) on the north bank of the Cooper, the site of future Nappa Merrie Homestead being only four miles upstream.

The Depot Camp is situated in Queensland seven miles upstream from the place where the Cooper enters South Australia, called Oontoo. This border post of Oontoo is still shown on official maps and was of some importance as a customs post before Federation, but today there is nothing there.

### THE CONRICKS

The Nappa Merrie run (mostly wide rolling downs with some gibber plains and timber growing along the many watercourses and channels which intersect the run) was taken up by John Conrick in the early 1870's. This young pastoralist travelled overland from Victoria with a mob of sheep in 1870, and eventually arrived at a magnificent waterhole in Cooper's Creek where he made his camp.

The blacks called this locality "Nappa Merrie" (sandhill by a waterhole). Conrick came to settle only about ten years after Burke and Wills were there, and was the first settler in that region of Inland Australia. Conrick soon got busy and opened up an interstate stock route between his property and the Adelaide market.

When John Conrick died, his son Edward G. Conrick, who was born there, took over management of this then famous wool-growing property. It is reported that consignments of scoured wool from the station often topped the Adelaide sales. The wool, after being scoured, was compressed into large bales, and these were transported to the Adelaide railway by that wonderful beast of burden, the camel, which did so much to open up these semi-arid regions of the far inland.

The homestead had the reputation of being one of the most picturesque in the inland, standing on a high rise overlooking the surrounding sandhill country and the large permanent waterhole in Cooper's Creek, almost the size of a lake and reputed to be up to 80 feet deep. Ted Conrick became a great personality of the inland, and was a pastoralist with a progressive outlook. He took an active interest in the running of the A.I.M. Nursing Home and Hostel opened at Innamincka in 1928.

In ordinary seasons, the carrying capacity of Nappa Merrie was reputed to be about 20,000 sheep and 10,000 cattle. In the good season of 1923 it is reported that 27,000 sheep were carried. Today the owners run only cattle.

## THE "DIG" TREE

Edward G. Conrick had a lively interest in history, particularly the Burke and Wills expedition with its close association with the local scene. As mentioned earlier, four miles from the homestead is probably the most famous of all historical trees, the "DIG" tree, as it has come to be called. It is an historical landmark, perhaps without equal in the romance and drama of inland exploration, and is today still alive, green and healthy.

As holder of the surrounding country, Ted Conrick took a close personal interest in this historic relic. While he was at Nappa Merrie Homestead, historians could feel they had a local guardian for this living memorial to a poignant chapter of Australian exploration.

Sister Elizabeth Burchill, in her book "*Innamincka*," describes a visit to the tree in these words:

"Boss took us to see the famous tree one memorable day. We left the car and walked through the trees that the explorers must have walked through. It was eerie, not only seeing, but feeling. The place seemed filled with haunting memories. About 40 feet from a wooded bank, beside a beautiful stretch of the Nappa Merrie waterhole, we gazed on the historic coolibah tree with its large overhanging branches. Since childhood I had been deeply moved by the story of Burke and Wills and their lonely deaths. New understanding of their tragic explorations came to me that day."

I have visited this historic place on three occasions in recent years, and, like Sister Burchill of the A.I.M., I had the same peculiar feeling that standing on the spot where history was made, gives to one out in the stillness and the solitude of the Never-Never. I again quote Miss Burchill:

"Silence fell on us as the past gave way to the present and we walked through country unaltered through the practice and pursuits of man, to the car. We had the strange feeling that being close to history gives."

## MEMORIAL CAIRN

Near the "DIG" tree is a cairn of stones cemented together and it carries a heavy bronze plaque with this inscription:

*Burke and Wills*

*Depot B DIG*

*LXV under 40 ft. W.*

*Dec. 6 1860—April 21 1861*

What did the message cut into the tree by the retiring

Depot party under William Brahe really say? It contained the word "DIG" beyond any doubt (hence the name DIG tree which posterity has bestowed on the noble old coolibah). But what was the rest of the message? At the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Expedition (which sat from 18 November 1861 to 31 January 1862) the survivor John King (who had been through a tremendous ordeal) was asked what was the message on the tree. He said he could not clearly remember, but thought it was "DIG 3ft. N.E. or N.W."

Now it seems to me unlikely that a large camel box containing about two cwt. of provisions would be buried as close as 3ft. from the base of a well-grown coolibah tree. How then is the wording of "40ft. west" as inscribed on the plaque arrived at?

I have not been able to establish the authority of these words beyond a reasonable doubt. The best authority to consult would have been Mr. E. G. Conrick, but my inquiries reveal that he has died, only within the last two years.

In 1955 Mr. Conrick sold Nappa Merrie property, which had been in the family for over 80 years, to the Schmidt family of "Goonoo Goonoo," Tamworth, New South Wales.

#### HISTORICAL RESERVES AT "DIG" TREE

I visited Cooper's Creek, Innamincka and the "DIG" Tree in August, 1960, while carrying out the Burke and Wills Centenary Re-enactment Run by car in which the explorers' route was followed from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria to mark the centenary of the expedition. Visiting the same region again last year (1966), it was apparent that the volume of motor traffic in the area had noticeably increased and road conditions had greatly improved.

On 14 February 1964, the surrender of an area of one acre from the lease of Chastleton Pastoral Holding (part of Nappa Merrie station property) was registered in the Lands Department at Brisbane. This area (as per the official record) is "for proposed Reserve for Memorial (Burke and Wills Camp 65 and 'DIG' Tree) purposes."

An Order-in-Council under "*The Land Acts, 1962 to 1963*" was issued by His Excellency the Governor-in-Council on 2 July 1964. This provides as follows:

The land described in the schedule thereto shall be reserved and set apart for Memorial purposes and the said land shall be placed under the control of The Royal Historical Society of Queensland, as Trustee.

The land referred to is described as: Reserve for Memorial (Burke and Wills Camp 65 and "DIG" Tree) Pur-

poses (R.7) being Portion 1 as shown on Plan Cpr. 2 deposited in the survey office.

County of Cooper

Parish of Oontoo

Area, about 1 acre, The Cunnamulla Land Agent's District. (Queensland Government Gazette, 4 July, 1964, page 1083.)

It is most pleasing to know that our Society thus has a vested interest in the very ground on which the DIG Tree is growing, as well as the Memorial Cairn erected there and an acre of land surrounding these historic landmarks.

As Trustee of this gazetted Reserve, it might be appropriate for the policy of the Society to be formulated in regard to the management of this historic trust property. An early official visit by representatives of the Society to inspect the Reserve on Cooper's Creek might be considered desirable. In this regard, I would be prepared to assist in every way possible.

In the course of his unsuccessful efforts to penetrate the harsh sand ridge country towards his objective of the centre of the Continent in 1845, Sturt found himself obliged to "return to Cooper's Creek" and its life-giving waters several times. Burke and Wills "returned to Cooper's Creek" there to die after their epic crossing of the Continent 6 December 1860-21 April 1861. Now that the Society are trustees of the Reserve on Cooper's Creek and responsible for the care and preservation of the living DIG Tree, it may be that members of the Society will from time to time "return to Cooper's Creek."